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Bundy's Role in Viet-Nam

The Action He Urged Has Raised Morale To Its Highest Point in Months

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

SAIGON—The most astonishing fact about the new and dramatic American policy of air attacks on the privileged sanctuary of North Viet-Nam was the role of McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's national security assistant.

Had it not been for Bundy's wholly coincidental visit to Saigon at the insistence of Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor, retaliatory air strikes might still be in the "discussion" stage.

Taylor requested Bundy's presence months ago as an on-the-spot observer in the deteriorating Vietnamese war. Taylor knew the value of Bundy's advice to President Johnson. He knew, too, that a true understanding of what has been happening out here required a good deal more than the study of endless documentary reports in the arid atmosphere of a Washington office.

It required, in short, the eyes of Bundy to see and the ears of Bundy to hear, both for himself and the President.

BUNDY'S COMING coincided with the savage Viet Cong attack on the United States air base at Pleiku. His reaction was immediate and insistent—neither the South Vietnamese government nor the United States could risk inaction in the face of such a bold and open insult.

At the MACV (Military Assistance Command Viet-Nam) command post in Saigon during the Viet Cong raid in Pleiku, Bundy sat with earphones and maps and personally heard the reports from Pleiku crackle over the wires to headquarters. He and Taylor decided to recommend an immediate counterstrike north of the 17th Parallel (as Taylor had repeatedly recommended before). Now Bundy was here to make the recommendation himself.

As the proposal was being framed for Washington, Bundy permitted himself a sardonic smile and an audible hope that "those so-and-so's in Washington" would grasp the situation as he had grasped it in Saigon.

Washington reacted promptly. The war entered a new and long overdue stage.

Accordingly, despite the corrosive instability of the Vietnamese government, so tragically out of touch with the mass of its citizens in hamlet and village, the action of the past few days has lifted spirits here to their highest point since the raids in the Gulf of Tonkin last August. But much must be decided before it can be safely said that the new spirit is here to stay.

For example, it quickly became apparent last August that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was a one-shot reaction. The quick thrust of hope that spread through the government and the American mission here ("We're all hawks," one ranking diplomat told us) gave way to disappointment, then to disillusion. The end psychological result left the "hawks" more despondent than before the Gulf of Tonkin.

A SIMILAR reaction is quite predictable today if the forward strategy is not continued and intensified. No one here knows whether it will be or not.

There is, too, the vital point of whether the tit-for-tat strategy of Pleiku and Qui Nhon is to be limited strictly to Viet Cong actions aimed only at the Americans, or whether it will be broadened to cover actions against the Vietnamese forces.

If limited to the former, the United States will soon be accused of putting a higher value on the life of a white man, thereby endangering the healthy relationship between our men in the field and the people we came here to defend.

But this much may be said: the invasion of the privileged sanctuary north of the 17th Parallel carried the war for the first time since August to the source of aggression. This war is directed, financed and exported by the Communist regime in Hanoi. Cutting this link with the Viet Cong Communist forces in the South would by no means guarantee an honorable end of the war.

But so long as the chain between Hanoi and the Viet Cong is not broken, there will be no chance whatever for an honorable solution.